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ABSTRACT

Examples of effective parent and citizen involvement in schools throughout the United States are cited. Actions include a ruling in Boston that parent groups have a right to monitor classrooms in that city; a new collective bargaining law which provides open access to information about the agenda and content of collective bargaining; and the creation of an Office of Parent Involvement in the new Department of Education. Also, several research studies indicate that parent and citizen involvement have beneficial effects. Several states have taken initiatives to foster citizen participation through mandating local advisory councils at the school building level. Community development programs have enlisted strong grass roots support to work on local problems. Many schools have initiated collaborative decision-making sessions which bring together educators, administrators, teachers, and parents. Citizens have also organized to reverse public policy they find damaging to their interest. Finally, community education programs have moved beyond adult education and recreation to becoming actively involved in community problems. (KC)

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Good Things Can Happen: Citizen Involvement in Schools

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SO 012 501

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This is an important meeting. It's one of the few times that people from all six New England states who are involved in some way or another in the parent movement have come together cutting across all the different bureaucratic lines that are represented here: Title I, bilingual parent advisory committees, community education groups, PTA's, Teacher Corps. People are here from Boston, Hartford, small towns, rural areas, and suburbs. It's a different mix. I think that is significant because most of you do not come together very often. There is a lot of fragmentation and lack of communication among all those who would see themselves in one way or another as a part of a movement that has to do with giving parents a larger voice in how their children are educated.

People in this room are probably joined together by some vague general interest rather than by anything very specific. And I just like to be clear about why I am here; and if there is a cause that I hope brings us together and a reason to assemble, I'd like to tell you what I think that is.

I think there are two reasons and the first is a very general, but a very real one. This society is going to be in bad shape if it doesn't find ways of empowering ordinary people in the communities in which they live to exercise more influence over their own lives and over the institutions that influence their lives. In many ways the most serious problem this country faces is that we have bought the elitest way of looking at the world. Most of us here become convinced that

life has become so complicated and that technology is so complicated that ordinary people can't be trusted to make decisions because they cannot understand the consequences of those decisions. Hence, you need experts and professionals who are trained up and will make those decisions, always in the behalf of all of those other people.

Most of us have a good deal of the elitism in our bloodstream. We have bought it. We hear it from politicians. We hear it from professors. We hear it from social scientists. We hear it all the time and I am suggesting to you that we believe it, more than most of us would like to admit, and that this is one of the most serious problems this society currently faces. One of the causes that I think should bring together and unite a group like this is trying to find ways of reversing this trend that there is a best and brightest cadre of people in this country who should run things for the rest of us.

The second cause is that I think public schools in the United States are in the most serious possible difficulty. Unless some important and significant changes are made in the ways schools are organized and run and the quality of education for young people is improved, we are in for trouble. Schools may not continue to exist as we've known them and I think that would be an enormously important loss to the society. We all know that over the last hundred years or so this country built a strong public school system in terms of the number and percentage of people in school. We all know that system also served very badly a number of people . . . the poor, minorities, handicapped . . . the least powerful people in the society. We all know that in the 1960's, because of the Civil Rights Movement and other movements that the Civil Rights Movement spawned, attention was given to the flaws of the system and some corrective action was taken. The courts applied the 14th Amendment to the schools which finally began to break down the legal framework of segregation. Handicapped children were finally recognized as being the responsibility

of the school systems regardless of what the nature of their handicap was. More and more black and minority youngsters were given access to schools and colleges. But the political reality, folks, is that just as that kind of progress was made—desegregation was at least made illegal, programs for the handicapped installed, bilingual education introduced, women's equity discussed seriously—the privileged classes wanted out of the system. In the large cities of the country, most of the children in school are children of poor people, minorities, and the white lower class. Now we have a variety of political proposals being taken very seriously which would make it easier for people to escape the public school system. Mr. Moynihan is persisting with his efforts in Congress to provide tax credits to help people send their children to private schools. This effort is being taken seriously in California and other places.

This society is absolutely dependent upon public institutions. I suggest that only the rich can afford to have weak government and weak public institutions. The rest of us need strong public institutions, strong government, strong public schools. To do something about this problem, however, I would suggest that the public schools are going to have to bring parents and the community into a new and genuine kind of partnership. Reforming the schools to make them actually work better in getting the kind of political constituency that they need to survive requires a new way of dealing with relationships between schools and community. There has to be a political and educational partnership. That is a very different thing from what we have normally had. That is the second reason I think we should be together tonight.

Over the last seven or eight years, the Institute for Responsive Education has done a lot of studies and reports about the status of citizen participation. Most of the

writing and speaking I've done in the last few years has been in a very negative tone. I have written and have spoken repeatedly about the problems . . . pointing out the serious gap between the rhetoric of participation and the reality of decision-making in schools; pointing out the inadequacies, weaknesses, and implications of the state and federal requirements and mandates for participation; talking about the domination of school committees and school boards by superintendents as a continuing phenomena; and talking about the declining rating that the public gives to public schools. But tonight I'm going to be a bearer of good news rather than develop any of those negative points which are true and could be developed.

I want, rather, to talk first about some of the good things that have happened and then to identify some of the promising models of citizen participation—the theme of this conference. The workshops some of you just attended, the workshops after this session, the workshops tomorrow, are all tied together by that theme of finding some things that work, some good ideas. If you will forgive me, I want to be a bearer of glad tidings rather than a person who recites the problems.

I have identified nine good things that have happened lately. First of all, related to what I was saying about the voucher system in California, the proponents of the voucher plan failed to get the 500,000 signatures needed to get the plan on the ballot in June. It will not be on that ballot this year. For me, that is good news and I think that for the low income and minority children in California it is good news. Second, in September, parents councils in Boston won a significant victory when Judge Arthur Garrity ruled that court-mandated parent groups have a right to monitor classrooms in that city. He said the burden is not on the parents and community groups to justify their monitoring. The burden is on the school defendants to justify the roadblocks that they have imposed on monitoring. That decision

is an enormously important part of building the legal framework for parent and citizen community participation. Third, California three years ago adopted a new collective bargaining law which for the first time provides open access to information about the agenda and the content of bargaining to the public. That law is now being implemented and carefully monitored by citizen groups. Other states such as Minnesota and Florida have opened bargaining to public scrutiny for the first time. The fourth piece of good news is that Congress and HEW have increased the requirements and have strengthened existing requirements for parent and citizen participation. In the 1978 amendments, Title I Advisory Committees were given more legal recognition in the law and given more access to information. The latest draft of the regulations that the Office of Education is currently working on gives the parent advisory committees for the first time direct access to the Office of Education on the handling of grievances. That idea is not in the legal framework yet but it is being seriously considered. The Teacher Corps' new mandated councils of course are a part of this direction.

The next piece of good news is that the new Department of Education will have in place, as it begins to function, an Office of Parent Involvement with a staff and with a mandate to oversee and look after parent and citizen requirements in federal legislation. Now, you can be sure that Office is not going to revolutionize your life or the work that you are doing at the grass roots level, but you can also be sure that at least it is going to provide a voice. The next piece of good news is that there have been several studies, including some recent ones, which indicate that parent and citizen involvement of various kinds have beneficial affects. One recent study from the New York Department of Education gave very strong evidence that the intellectual and cognitive development of children is enhanced by various forms of involvement of their parents with the school. This was just

one of a number of studies that have been coming out in the last two or three years that indicates that the benefits of parent involvement to children, to schools, to parents, to communities are substantial. I think it's good news.

In several states, initiatives have been taken to foster citizen participation. We are working in California, South Carolina and Florida, for example, with newly mandated local advisory councils at the school building level. New Jersey is considering adopting a school improvement program roughly patterned after the California program for school improvement and other states have let us know they are interested in the same possibility. There are also new forms of parent and citizen involvement that are being adopted. I was informed that there were 5 new parent unions established in the State of New Jersey during the last year and a half. They were modeled after the Philadelphia parents' union. There is beginning to be evidence in some places of a renaissance of the PTA. PTA's are beginning to undertake serious work on educational issues along with their traditional school service roles.

The most lively sector of citizen participation, which is good news for us, is the emergence over the last five or six years of grass roots community development organizations all across the country, in both cities and rural areas. There are grass roots community development organizations by all kinds of names—in Massachusetts there's Fair Share, in the south there s ACORN. They have enlisted strong grass roots support to work on important local community problems like housing, health, jobs, transportation. The fact is that very few of them give much attention to school issues. But the good news is that there is potential interest and the possibility that those community groups interested in school issues can find ways of joining forces with those of you in this room.

Now I'd like to identify eight or nine good models or good developments in some of the programs and projects that you are going to be hearing about which fit in this conference. First is the recognition, now on a much wider scale than before, of the old adage that knowledge is power. Without knowledge about the issues, the efforts of citizens and parents to influence school issues is not going to work. I have always been enormously impressed with the work of the Highlander Center in Tennessee founded by Miles Horton. It was really founded on the notion that knowledge is the tool necessary for community people to exercise more influence. He said,

> The control of information about situations like a strike, tax rates, government regulations, budgets, program proposals, is one means by which the powerful maintain control over the awareness and action of the powerless. When information can root it out, translate it if necessary into understandable form and put it into the hands of those affected by its content; it can be blended with citizen experience and used as a tool for change.

In Atlanta, partly as a result of the work that we did there in a NIE study, a new organization called Applecore has been formed, essentially a parent information center. It is providing information, publications, workshops and technical assistance across that city. One of the striking things about Applecore is that it is one of the few successful efforts I have seen that bridges the lines of the poor, the middle class and the working class of that city as well as racial lines. In many ways, the Applecore project was patterned after the parent resource center in West Boylston here in Massachusetts, also a very successful program.

A second example of how good things can happen has to do with collective bargaining, which I mentioned earlier. There is good evidence that across the country the idea that parents and citizens have a right to information about

what is bargained for by school employers and school employee unions is catching on. In Rochester, New York, for example, parent groups now elect a person who sits at the bargaining table with management and the employee unions. In Berkeley, California, a citizen consulting committee is appointed by the board and meets before and during the bargaining process and serves as a forum for channeling the ideas of the community about the issues being bargained. There are many other examples of how a legal framework is being set up so that the bargaining process begins to include community people.

Another good example of how things can happen that are positive has to do with collaborative decision-making at the school building level where educators, administrators, teachers, and parents can come together to share in decision-making. The examples that I cited in California, Florida, and South Carolina can be noted again. In California there are some good examples where school site councils are in fact making an important contribution to educational development. I visited one school where an important innovative multicultural program was developed jointly by teachers and parents working together writing and developing materials which draw on the resources of the community, all as a part of the school site council enterprise. In Salt Lake City they now have established at each school building level a *school council* composed of teachers and administrators and a second *community council* that is parallel and composed of parents. These two councils jointly, in a kind of negotiating stance, have the responsibiilty of setting the school schedule, of making determinations about school programs, of determining allocations in the budget within the overall budget allocation that is provided to each school. The parent council works at both the school level and at the district level.

Another good example is how citizens can organize to reverse public policy that they find damaging to their

interest. Here the specific example is from Boston. Those of you who saw the slide tape presentation about the work of CPAC a few minutes ago or will see it later this evening will hear the story of parents and the MASPAC for bilingual education programs. These efforts were in response to the superintendent's decision to reorganize bilingual education in the city in a way that was taken by parents to be damaging to the interest of bilingual children. Carmen Pola and her supporters were able to organize four or five hundred Hispanic parents to get the Boston School Committee to reverse its decision and to win not only the temporary victory but to go beyond that and win the right for MASPAC to participate on a continuing basis in planning and decision-making in relationship to bilingual programs.

Another example of good things that can happen is around the model of the "umbrella council," jargon for how to address the problem of fragmentation and duplication of efforts among parent and citizen groups at the schoo' building level. I can remember about 4 years ago visiting a school in San Jose, California, in which existed a Title I Parent Advisory Committee, Title VII Advisory Committee, a Follow-Through Policy Board, a State School Improvement Council, and a PTA. There were so many groups that there weren't enough parents or parent energy to go around and the principal could not possibly give honest responses to all of this apparatus. They now have a council in that school that cuts across all the bureaucratic lines and mandated groups and also reaches out to a wide range of community organizations—an umbrella council.

The next example of good things happening has to do with the way parents are responding in the area of declining enrollments and school closings. In many ways, this issue is the most controversial and hottest that many school districts in this country currently face. We just completed a

study called "Rising Above Decline," based on eleven case studies from different parts of the country showing how parents and citizens have been involved with school districts in trying to deal constructively with the issue. Some of the cases are not positive ones. Some of them indicate how parents and citizens were not involved adequately and how the result was political turmoil and educational disaster. But there are many good examples including work being done by a new organization in Iowa called PURE (Parents United for Rural Education). People have organized very effectively to work with school districts and school officials there to resist unneeded consolidation, to try to bring people back into small towns, and to try to design a plan for declining enrollment that does not harm children. And, again in Boston, the work of CPAC and other parent groups in resisting the process and content of the United Facilities Plan is noteworthy, even though that story is not finished. At least, it has been demonstrated that the parent movement in Boston is determined to have a voice in decisions about how this district is going to respond to declining enrollments.

The next examples of good things happening are the signs that the community education programs across the country are increasingly beginning to move beyond the traditional model of adult education and recreation to becoming actively involved in community problems. One example that comes often to our attention is the Center for Community Education for Citizen Participation in Santa Barbara. This community education program has moved out to community organizing and community education in a very broad sense and is involved in helping community people learn how to address and solve their own problems. I am sure there are similar examples that can be cited by the community education people in this room about similar activities in New England and those will be part of the content of the workshops tonight and tomorrow.

And finally, good things are happening when parents and citizens organize to maintain and improve their own schools and to make those schools reflect their own interests, history and culture. What I am talking about here are the countless efforts over the last 20 years of communities to resist the consolidation and homogenization of education. They seek to find ways of maintaining schools that reflect their own community interests. One of the most interesting good examples that I have come across recently comes from Mingo County, West Virginia. While it is far away and in no way part of our New England scene, it has some lessons in it that I thought might be useful in attempting to look at some of the good things that can happen.

In Mingo County, which is a very small rural mountainous area of West Virginia, a small school called Big Laurel was closed about three years ago. A padlock was just put on the door, without notice or hearing, because the enrollment was declining to about 15 or 16 kids. It would save money if these kids went to the other county schools. The problem is that the roads of this town have potholes even bigger than the ones we have in New England. The roads were so bad that the children who were now enrolled in other county schools were only able to go to school about four months out of the year. The rest of the time they had to stay home. They were falling behind. After a year, parents in the community finally organized themselves with the leadership of a woman by the name of Edith Pepper who happened to be 83 years old. She persuaded, over a period of time, *all* the parents in Big Laurel to remove their children from the public schools and to boycott the public schools. They set about to build their own school building and to recruit a couple of teachers. They found qualified teachers and, with their help, built a genuinely rural curriculum in that school. The curriculum drew upon the wisdom, the culture and the history of the community and still prepared the young

people with the basic skills and the kind of life-coping skills that were necessary should they choose to leave Mingo County. Now, the school building did not have many of the amenities, but it had all kinds of things that we would call innovations like peer teaching (kids teaching each other), individualized instruction, the use of the community to teach youngsters. It worked. They stayed in school; they went on to high school and did well. The only problem, of course, was that they did not have any money. All of you know how difficult it is to get money to sustain an alternative school. So they negotiated over a period of a year with the county schools and agreed to re-enroll their children in the county school if, in turn, they would be allowed to operate their own school. They are operating now as a public school, still maintaining its unique quality.

I would like to read to you a statement that was prepared by a friend of mine by the name of Jonathan Sher who visited Mingo County not too long ago and commented on what happened. What he said has something to do with why you are here and why I am up here right now. He wrote, "What has happened at Big Laurel is an important testament to what can be accomplished in even the most adverse circumstances through hard work, persistence, community solidarity and an ability to effectively tap sources with outside help." While some aspects of this story seem miraculous, the real point is that a community of dedicated people was able to accomplish what the public authorities either would or could not and the children have finally become beneficiaries rather than the victims of their schooling. By lighting this candle instead of simply cursing the darkness, the Big Laurel community has illuminated the enduring value of citizen action in education. And it seems to me that the purpose of this conference is to give most of us here a new supply of such candles.